

Abstract

This comparison between Bahrain and Australia shows how the main impact of social and mobile media has been in the form of facilitators of rapid political mobilization, as well as tools for everyday socializing and entertainment. Social media are both contributors to, and symptomatic of, a blurring of the boundaries between politics and entertainment, and public and private spheres, whether their users are in Australia or Bahrain, but they are not in themselves the makers of material sites of democracy or even agency.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Change, Mobile Media, Arab Spring, Wikileaks, Slactivism/ Hactivism

From Masterchef to the Arab Spring via Wikileaks: Social Media and Political Change

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Introduction

In this paper, we provide a comparison between the ways in which social media and digital tools were used during the Arab Spring on the one hand, and by the Australian public on the other. Social media have been used in the Middle East for 'direct action' reasons like organising protests, and toppling dictatorships, most spectacularly with Libya's Colonel Gaddafi in mid-2011. However, in long-established social democracies like Australia the use of social media and digital tools for political purposes is diminished, while also concentrated within 'special interest groups' or party campaign teams. The rest of the population uses the same tools to vote on *Australia's Got Talent* or comment on their favourite *Masterchef* contestant. For these, and related, reasons, 'democracy' takes on different material guises in different political contexts, affecting the often lauded 'democratising potential' of new digital tools and social media that are said to revolutionise communication but, as it turns out, probably not global society. As an examination of the gap between material and virtual revolution for positive social change, the following essay compares Australian and Arab World expressions of informed and networked activism during the early part of 2011 as a way of considering shared and disparate approaches to the media's role in fostering social democracy as a material cause.

Social Media, Political Agency and the Arab Spring: The Case of Bahrain

Some of the waves of the Arab Spring, which started in December 2010 when Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in a public square outside a local government office in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid (Comninos, 2011) continues to reverberate throughout 2011

with historic outcomes. Three long term rulers gave in to protesters' demands for their removal: in Tunisia, Egypt and, spectacularly, in Libya with the toppling of long-term dictator Muammar Gaddafi. They followed earlier small scale versions with the 2004 Arab Spring in Cairo, leading to further demonstrations in Beirut in 2005 and in Cairo in 2006 (Yom, 2005; Hardaker, 2008), and the 'green revolution' in Iran in 2009 (Cole, 2011; Black, 2009). Interestingly, the beginnings of these protests, and the accompanying demands for political change and more political freedoms, have coincided with the rise and rapid spread of social media and increasingly mobile digital tools, leading to various claims of 'Twitter' or 'Facebook Revolutions' (Comminos, 2011; Aiello, 2011).

There is no doubt that social media had a major impact on the way political actors organise themselves and on the ways in which they can mobilise very quickly, but as tools rather than agents. They "do not of themselves generate revolutions but they can facilitate them in ways that we are only just beginning to understand" (Harb, 2011, p. 15). Bahrain illustrates this distinction well because its ruling regime managed to crack down on protests in March 2011 where Egypt and Libya could not, which is a result of its geographical, historical and political context. Bahrain effectively provides a buffer between Shia dominated, non-Arab Iran, and the ruling Arab Sunni regimes in the Arabian Gulf. At the same time, it experiences a so-called "youth bubble, with 60% of the Middle East population under the age of 25", creating the "prospect of a large class of unemployed, well-educated young people who are net-savvy and accustomed to using the internet as a place to express their opinion" (Hardaker, 2008, p. 17). In other words, this is Generation Y with a specific Arab flavour, "a generation of younger people in the Arab world growing up with a new reality: through sites like Facebook they can participate in shaping decisions which affect their lives" (p. 17). This is precisely what they thought they were doing in Bahrain in the weeks following the first protests on 14

February 2011 and the subsequent occupation of the symbolic Pearl Roundabout in central Manama, until the regime decided that enough was enough, not coincidentally after protesters had one morning blocked the entry to the financial district, the epicentre of Bahrain's power elite.

Now, the Pearl Roundabout stands 're-designed' in a concerted effort to erase the memory of Bahrain's short-lived uprising against the regime, and the iconic pearl sculpture that used to be in the centre of the roundabout has been dismantled. The (now) intersection and streets that lead into it are closed and patrolled by security forces for fear it might become a rallying point again. In the meantime, various ministries are systematically going through Bahraini workplaces and educational institutions to identify, question and dismiss those who were involved in the protests. Ironically, the very social media that were so instrumental in building a groundswell and momentum for change, in particular Facebook and YouTube, have left a trail of 'evidence' to assist the regime in its crackdown. As Comninou notes, "Twitter and Facebook, as well as being possible instruments of protest, can also render users vulnerable to state surveillance" (2011, p.10), and they are now being used to identify and locate activists and protesters. At the same time, official sanctioned discourse is about a 'national dialogue', which mostly excludes those activists.

Democratisation in Bahrain?

When it comes to western style democracy, including a democratic and political public sphere combined with a democratic civil society, it is worth drawing attention to a fundamental difference in the Arab world, which applies in particular to Gulf states such as Bahrain. The difference is that many regimes "inhabit states that receive substantial portions

of their budget from foreign payments rather than national productive groups. This arrangement insulates elites from domestic demands, since the state's primary task is distributing fluid wealth, not collecting it through taxation" (Yom, 2005, p. 25). This fundamental difference has huge implications for the democratization process, as it gives the populace very little bargaining power when it comes to increasing political freedom, as all the wealth and resources (apart from the people) are controlled by the regime, which in Bahrain's case is a long-established constitutional monarchy (Howard, 2011). Central to this level of control is what Eva Bellin (cited in Yom, 2005) calls "the robustness of its coercive apparatus, the military-security establishment responsible for demolishing democratic initiatives against the state" (p. 25). According to Dahlgren, the civic culture concept "suggests the need for minimal shared commitments to the vision and procedures of democracy, which in turn entails a capacity to see beyond the immediate interests of one's own group" (2005, p. 158). The question thus becomes whether this 'endemic fragmentation' actually may have impeded the chances for democratization in Bahrain (and in the Arab world more generally). Joseph (2011) argues for example that:

It is possible that pro-democracy movements in the Arab world moved too quickly: the 'conversations' arising from newly available information might not have been mature enough to establish a properly functioning public sphere or civil society, so perhaps the resultant loose networks moved prematurely towards galvanization and organization.

This argument is interesting because it fits with the Gen Y profile of the protesters (Prensky, 2001), whose 'natural environment' is a networked, online, mobile and arguably 'fragmented' environment, where information is abundant, continuous, and often comes in

bite-sized chunks, but is not necessarily always effective and coherent. Moreover, this generation has plenty of enthusiasm, but it is unlikely that they are as politically savvy as they are techno-savvy. Joseph is right to argue that “it is patronizing to assume that Arabs are not ready for democracy” (2011, p. 32), but this is not the argument here. Instead, there are questions around whether the protesters’ approach, and in particular their use of social media, was effective, and whether it is based on a coherent idea about what kind of democratic society is the desirable end point. According to Yom, “Arab autocracy will not crumble unless a major shock snaps the underlying political-economic framework upon which the coercive apparatus rests” (2005, p. 27). In Bahrain, it looked for a few weeks in February as if this shock was being delivered, fuelled by social and mobile media, but for now the underlying political-economic framework has been restored, and democracy has very little to do with it.

Generation Y, Social and Mobile Media & Political Change in Bahrain

When it comes to social media and Generation Y, the biggest dilemma facing Arab regimes is their perceived need “to resist the new media’s assault on their power and authority, while at the same time harnessing its power to develop their national economy” (Hardaker, 2008, p. 3). The tension for Arab regimes lies between ‘liberalising’ and ‘globalising’ their economies (in anticipation of the post-oil era), for which they need an educated and techno-savvy young generation, and on the other hand the requirement to control, contain and manage information and particularly political information, as this is what keeps them in the power position they hold. As Shen and Shakir’s research in the UAE shows, “the conflict brought by the usage of the Internet and exposure to western culture fundamentally shapes the self-perception of this young generation” (2009, p. 2). This is not simply one-way traffic either. Aiello (2011) notes

for example that “one of the ways in which the internet has been instrumental in transforming conflicts is by allowing local conflicts to become globalised”.

Research conducted prior to the current Arab Spring suggests that the Internet and social media usage of Arab youths was relatively similar to that of their contemporaries in western contexts, with large percentages for entertainment and social use (Shen & Shakir, 2009). The question however, is to what extent this generation is political in a ‘deliberatively democratic’ sense (Dahlgren, 2005), and how *consistently* political it is, and moreover, how politically *effective*. In other words, ‘deliberatively political engagement’ did not appear to be particularly significant, and the ‘political’ engagement of this generation seemed just as likely to be limited to voting for favourite contestants on *Arabs Got Talent*, as their Australian counterparts would be voting for their favourite Australian *Masterchef*, rather than their local MP. This is in line with what Gladwell calls ‘slacktivism’, which relates to his argument that social media promote weak ties and low risk activism (cited in Joseph, 2011). As Joseph notes, “the ‘liking’ of something on Facebook, or the retweeting of a story, require little effort, yet might lull the protagonists into thinking they are doing something meaningful” (2011, p. 5). Gladwell takes this argument a step further by suggesting that “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make real sacrifice, but by motivating them to do the things people do when they’re not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice” (cited in Joseph, 2011, p. 5). This is the counter argument against the relative hype surrounding ‘Twitter and Facebook revolts’ (Howard, 2011) and the role of social media, as “social media may create quicker and louder conversations, it may also generate shallower and shorter conversations which are easily displaced by the next ‘big thing’” (Joseph, 2011, p. 6). In Bahrain, the protesting youths are mostly Shia and economically marginalized already, so it is not difficult to reinforce their marginalization (for example by expelling them from

educational institutions), as they were never in a position of power to begin with. However, this may also make Bahrain's Generation Y more determined in the long run, as they have increasingly less to lose, and their demands for change are bolstered by fast-changing social and mobile media that provide them with progressively more flexible options to plan their strategies for change.

Australian Social Networking: Entertainment, “Us” and “Them”

It was this planned and sustained will for regime change that many Australians found difficult to comprehend about the Arab Spring's enlivened body politic.

Absorbed in reality TV lifestyle and talent shows as well as the social networking sites that network their audiences, Australians tend to dissent or agree at sites where asserting authority-to-comment matters more than personal privacy or space. According to Alison Horbury and Peter Hughes (2010, p. 152) contributors to Facebook and Twitter, during and after Australia's Black Saturday bushfires on February 7, 2009 killed 167 people in Victoria, were quick to draw boundaries 'between “us/we” – Aussies, all those who demonstrate compassion and insight in their response, local, national and global bushfire communities – and ‘them’ – government, authority figures, Facebook itself.” The social network's “self-policed” activity and publication was experienced as the popularly preferred source of news and public participation during the disaster and its aftermath. This self-policing had been perceived as more effective than the institutional regulators of mainstream media, such as the Australian Communications and Media Authority, which was criticized in recent years for *not* acting on public complaints about commercial radio and television content while also keeping a ‘blacklist’ of local websites with links to content considered inappropriate (Oates,

2009). Interestingly, this can be contrasted with the argument about ‘surveillance’ in the Bahraini context. In other words, in the Australian context, it is actually possible to express an argument about self-policing publicly, while in Bahrain, ‘self-policing’ is only an indirect effect of ‘actual policing’. In other words, people ultimately begin to police themselves (and/or censor themselves) to avoid becoming entrapped in real policing crackdowns, whether they agree with it or not.

There are two reasons readily identifiable to general audiences for Australian courts’ reluctance to ascribe any noblesse oblige to mainstream media professionals as the more practiced gate-keepers of the news and information, essential to participatory democratic processes (Kasniunas, 2008). First, repeated instances of social network sites scooping the metropolitan dailies on stories of political transformation as well as private transgression have only reaffirmed arguments about the diffusion of media authority. News workers have been described as being more like ‘gate-watchers’ than gatekeepers (Bruns, 2005) and have in Australia watched the virtual gate collapse on various fronts, and with various implications that have most often little, and sometimes a lot, to do with political agency or consciousness-raising. The most notorious recent case of a social media user who scooped and also ‘worked’ the daily news mediaⁱ involved a 17-year-old Melbourne school girl who uploaded photographs of naked elite Australian Football League players onto Facebook (Paton, 2011). A Federal Court injunction ordered removal of the photographs but did not prevent the girl uploading those of other naked players. The *Herald-Sun* newspaper later collaborated with the girl in a hotel room video ‘sting’ that resulted in more social media publication of captioned video and photography, the suspension of an AFL club executive and, most concerning given laws prohibiting identification of minors by the media, a commercial television interview that named the girl and showed her face (Gleeson, 2011).

The second reason for Australian legal decision-makers now reconsidering the balance of power and public interest of mainstream media and social networking is the international significance of issues of source revelation, press freedom, security and surveillance in the wake of Wikileaks' publication of the US war logs in 2010. Since Wikileaks partnered with the *Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, and the *New York Times* to drop the classified war documents about Iraq and Afghanistan into reports showing how the mainstream news media in 2003 did not pursue, let alone find the truth about, non-existent weapons of mass destruction or casualties from either side, the institutionalized media in many countries has had to concede its reliance on media amateurs and DIY hacktivists. Since the 9/11 attacks and across the world, the role of bloggers and social networkers in providing smaller 'neighbourhoods' of people wanting news or reasons for news events has been acknowledged (Zelizer & Allan, 2011). The 'smallness' of ventures facilitated is the edge that social media has on its traditional and institutional predecessors, who deal with the costs, now, of attempting to house investigative journalism, for instance, in solid walls with significant salary, site and insurance bills. Australian outlets are no exception to this trend and have confronted it just as some regimes were realizing the threat that it presented to the maintenance or accrual of political power. According to Sarah Ellison, trained journalism and the moveable feast of social media raises a conflict "as old as civilization itself" (Ellison, 2011, *Vanity Fair* online). "At the moment," writes Ellison, "neither seems to have the upper hand – and neither can do without the other."

It might seem an inadequate observation by comparison that Australian courts are currently hearing and interpreting cases that reflect the symbolically violent consequences of evidence accumulated on the geomorphic function of social media for *local* understandings of what

constitutes ‘public’ and ‘private’, according to shifting individual and group expectations (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 812). However, it is possible to take this observation further, in comparison with the scenes from Bahrain, to consider whether Australians’ *localised* expectations of their own individual communicative freedoms have eroded what might once have passed for political activism or even a shared outrage that at least tends to shift the scale back towards fair representation in all of its democratic senses. The moment had already been enjoyed, after all, not long ago in Australia’s political past.

After the 2007 Australian Federal Election, the activist group GetUp! was credited with boosting the Labor Party bid for office with an issues-driven organization of online lobby groups into grass roots street activities (Huijser & Little, 2008). The networking positives of social media were subsequently held up by some as indicators of a trend towards genuine participatory democracy, since the engagement included net surfers who were compelled to click ‘yes’ to giving cash to fund GetUp!’s television commercials. No matter that they could donate anonymously and standing, in the ersatz way of the lounge or office chair, shoulder to shoulder with those sharing the same concerns, without having to actually touch them. Participatory democracy had won its apparent victory through social media, but that was before Australians had to fill out another ballot paper less than two years later in yet another Federal Election. This poll was borne out of the ruling Labor party’s caucus room move to oust Prime Minister Kevin Rudd during his first term of office and replace him with a consensus-driven Julia Gillard. So aware of the value of being liked and of getting behinds on seats in front of screens was she that PM Gillard shifted scheduling of a live TV debate with her Liberal Party opponent Tony Abbott, so that it would not clash with the timing of the Ten Network’s broadcast of the final episode of *Masterchef*.ⁱⁱ Minus spatulas, aprons, and gourmet salad leaves, neither contender for the Prime Ministerial position in the two-party

preferred system was able to form government without the cross-bench support of three independent MPs. Australians had indicated ‘none of the above’ so apparently to some lobbyists, that a submission to include that option on future ballot papers was tabled this year at a parliamentary committee on electoral systems. Disquieting locally, the submission proposed a rationale for inclusion of the ‘none of the above’ option that seems confounding in view of what Arab protesters risked in order to recuperate older traditions of public participation in government:-

Voting in this country is still conducted under law decisions, rulings, and interpretations that were made almost 100 years ago. In the time frame since, much has changed in the way politics work, and how candidates campaign and get elected. It is time for this review Committee to make recommendations that will allow the AEC to conduct elections that allow all voters, to vote their true choice/decision/view on the ballot paper (Bleys, 2011, p. 19).

As noted earlier in relation to Australian courts attempting to find the law on social networking and hacktivism, this lag between the public and private expectations of citizens and the civil responsibility of protecting the foundation processes of social democracy means that the perception of these processes has shifted. The interactivity, immediacy, and multiplicity of platforms for self-performance generated by social media means that a Constitutional right that is more than a century-old can be perceived as warranting relegation, as in the above quotation, to the obsolete. It does not assist civic consciousness or representative democracy much either, when Australians elect no one, other than the eventual winner of *Masterchef* for 2010, with a clear mandate to represent their core interests (Meade, 2011).

Conclusion

There is significant potential for further research on the comparative political disengagement of Australian audiences (across generations) captivated as they are by lifestyle and reality talent television, compared with the Generation Y of the Arab Spring, where they are moved to risk economic and physical violence in their street-by-street, shoulder-to-shoulder protests for more democratic freedoms. A guiding question for such an enquiry would develop from the consideration of self-policing and self-performance in the cultural arenas of Facebook and Twitter blogs on *Masterchef* or *Australia's Got Talent*. While their Arab counterparts crowd the Arab streets, while still Tweeting about *Arabs Got Talent* in their spare time in between protests, do Australian social networkers replicate a sense of participatory agency in what is otherwise experienced as a stalemated system of governance (political, judicial, communicative) where resistance is articulated in passive repudiation of traditional channels of involvement? Worth considering, too, is whether there is an implicit value judgment in relegating Australian social networking's collapse of the public-private spheres into blurry and problematic scenarios for the lawmakers and mainstream media, as if that were not, in itself, a political act.

In this paper we have explored the extent to which social media are used for political reasons, and furthermore, *how* they are used for political reasons. We have deliberately used two rather different contexts to focus on in our case studies: Australia and Bahrain. The reason for these choices were that Australia is a typical example of a liberal democracy and it can be assumed that social media use and political engagement have strong similarities with the situation in other liberal democracies. The choice of Bahrain may not seem obvious in the first instance, but Bahrain, despite its small size, is often used as a litmus test for what is

happening in the Arabian Gulf, as Bahrain can be seen as a microcosm of the wider Gulf region, and because it is geographically (and culturally) located in the liminal zone between the Arab world and 'Persian' Iran. What the comparison shows is two very different conceptions of what politics means and of what counts as 'political', while there are at the same time very clear parallel in terms of social media use for purely entertainment and social reasons.

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ⁱ See the ABC *Media Watch* story, 'Playing the Media' February 28, 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3151133.htm>

ⁱⁱ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MasterChef_Australia_\(season_2\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MasterChef_Australia_(season_2)) The final episode of Master Chef season 2 screened on Channel 10, nationally, on July 25, 2010. The Australian Federal Election called after former PM Kevin Rudd was deposed by current PM Julia Gillard was held on August 26, 2010.